Undertaker's Tale
1870's Fiction Not readable

Th[illegible] Tale.

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Toward night fall on the 14th of January, 18—, I trudged into the poor little village of Hydesburg. I had walked far, that day; at least it seemed far for a half-starved boy of fifteen to have come. I had lain in a barn the night before, & been discovered & roughly driven away early in the morning. I had begged for food & shelter at three farm houses during the day; but had been refused. At the last place the chil-

He had this [illegible] to be unresponsive [illegible] at The Farm

The Uncle Lake's Tale.

We did not drop suddenly upon the subject, but wandered into it in a natural way — I & my pleasant new acquaintance. He said it "was about this way" — & began:

Toward nightfall on the 14th of January, 18—, I trudged into the poor little village of Strydesburg. I had walked far, that day, at least it seemed far for a half-starved boy of fifteen to have come. I had lain in a barn the night before, & been discovered & roughly driven away early in the morning. I had begged for food & shelter at three farm houses during the day, but had been refused. At the last place the chil-

dogs set the dogs on me & I was glad to get away with some loss of flesh & a part of my rags. I was very hungry, now, & very tired. The wounds made by the dogs were stiff & painful. I had been an outcast for a month & had fared harshly all the time. I was hopeless, now, & afraid to supplicate at any door.

The darkness drew on, the outlines of the village houses grew vague, the lights began to twinkle in the windows. The wind swept the street in furious gusts, driving a storm of snow & sleet before it. I stopped in front of a

small house & leaned on the low fence, for there was a pleasant picture, ~~was~~ for an out cast, visible through one of the windows. It was a family at supper. There was a roaring wood fire burning on the hearth; there was a cat curled up in a chair, asleep; there were some books on a what-not, some pictures on the walls; but mainly there was the smoking supper; a benevolent looking man of middle age ~~was~~ sat at the foot of the table; a motherly dame at its head, & a little boy & girl at one side. It was

like looking into paradise.

I never once thought of knocking at that door. I had had enough of cuffs & curses. I no longer believed that there were men in the world who would pity me or any other miserable creature.

It was very dark, now. A man who was running by behind an umbrella, struck against me with such a shock that both of us fell. He cursed me roundly as he gathered himself up, & gave me a good-bye kick as he left. It caught me on one of my dog-bites & made me cry out with

the pain. Then he was lost in the darkness & the driving storm. But a sweet girlish voice said, "Poor thing, are you hurt?" & I saw a dim figure bending over me. I said —

"I only stopped just a minute. I was not meaning any harm, please. I am going away, now."

The girl said —

"Going away? Where? Do you live in the village?"

"No, please."

"Then where are you going, such a night as this?"

"I don't know."

"What! Have'nt you any ~~friends~~ place to stay?"

"No."

"Nor any friends?"

"No."

"Yes you have!"

"Where?"

"There — in the house — my father's house. We are your friends. Come."

She helped me up, & tried to lead me toward the door, whereat I was very glad for a moment, but then straightway afraid again. So I said —

"Please let me go away, & I will not come any more. Honest, I will not."

But it was no use. The girl dragged me into the house, expecting nothing else but to be hustled out again the next moment. But it was not so. The whole

family gathered about me, took me to the fire, & more warmed me with their pitying words than the fire did.

I carried a full stomach to a good bed that night. And I worshiped those people, knowing no gods but these nor desiring any other.

II

When two weeks had gone by, from that time, my former life had dimmed to a dream. It seemed to me as if I had always been a part of this dear good loving family.

I called Mr. Cadaver father & his wife mother. Jimmy & Mary & Grace were brother & sisters to me. Grace was the one that saved me. She was eighteen years old, & so fair & shapely, & so sweet and so unapproachably beautiful that it was heaven to me to look at her face & listen to her voice.

Business was prosperous, & we were all as blithe & happy as birds. I became useful in many ways & felt the gratification of knowing that I was earning the bread I ate. I learned to assist Grace in decorating the

insides of the coffins with pleated cambrics or cambric stuffs, according to the requirements of the customers. We talked & sang by the hour while we made ~~flo~~ caskets of flowers or wreathed immortelles. Sometimes, as she wrought with her nimble needle upon a shroud, she would tell me the simple history of the person who was to wear it; for it was but a little village, & she knew all about everybody. All day long the music of her father's plane was heard in the back shop, & we lived in an atmosphere of deep

peace & contentment.
I learned to arrange
the coffins in the front
shop so as to get the best
effects, grasing the rear
rows with festoons of
crape ~~which~~ depending
from immortelles
fastened against the
walls, with here & there a
soft white shroud & in
the intervals finely pol-
ished coffin plates that
reflected the sunlight
almost like mirrors.
I took care of the horse,
& was often allowed to
drive the hearse. There
was no rival in our busi-
ness in the village. We
had it all.

But by & by there came

an evil day. I will tell about this. Gracie had a sweetheart whom she dearly loved & had promised to marry. This was a most excellent young man named Joseph Parker, who had commenced life in the humblest circumstances, but had risen by honest endeavor till he was now sexton to the village church, & grave digger. The graveyard was ~~a pub-~~ ~~lic one,~~ owned by several citizens, who presently wished to sell it. It was pleasantly located on a hill side & very desirable. Young Parker conceived the idea of

buying it. It was a great chance, but the price was a vast one, being six hundred dollars, & he had no money. Mr. Cadaver loved Joseph, & he could not bear to see this opportunity lost; he looked from Gracie's beseeching eyes to Joseph's & his heart was touched. He said —

"You shall have the graveyard, my children; take yourselves off, now, & be happy."

You should have seen Gracie throw her arms around his neck, & pat his cheek & cry for joy.

So Mr. Cadaver ~~mortgaged his house~~ ~~as security~~ for the six hundred dollars. ~~Joseph~~ borrowed the money of old Marlow the skinflint, & the beautiful graveyard was Josephs. That was a happy night. We all sat around the fire, Joseph with Gracie's little hand in his, & all the talk was of how good & sweet was life. Joseph said —

"If we have a good season, I can pay off the debt in six months."

"That will be a pleasant thing," said the old man; "and I think the signs are in favor of a

good season. It is a very changeable winter, with much wet & much cold."

"Yes," said Mr. Cadaver, "it is just such a winter as the one before Jimmy was born. There was ever so much croup & pneumonia in the spring." & R "I remember it," said ~~Mamma~~ Gracie. — "There was ever so much sickness, & very few got well. I remember Father's saying he had never seen business so brisk."

Mr. Cadaver drew a long sigh. He said: "Those were great days — great days. They

don't often come. However, it is not for us to complain; that would be ungrateful indeed."

Grace smiled sweetly & said —

"Dear old father, to hear him talk, one would think he was afraid somebody might think him capable of being ungrateful. Why father, adversity only brings out your gentleness & patience. Do you remember the time that not one person died in this village during twenty-eight days? Were you downcast? Did you show any bitterness? No — not one angry word escaped your lips. You

hardly even betrayed annoyance."

Mr. Cadaver kissed her cheek lovingly & patted her on the head. He said —

"There — there's your punishment, little flatterer!"

He beamed on her with fatherly pride, & there was moisture in his eyes. Gracie turned her pretty mouth toward Joseph, & said —

"How can you see me so cruelly punished & not ~~defend~~ protect me?"

"Because you ~~deserved~~ deserved it, poor child — you deserved double what you got — & there 'tis!"

He kissed the rosy lips, & got a pretty little love-box on his ear for his pains. Everybody laughed, & we all fell to joking & chaffing & had such a good time. By & by Mr. Cadaver took down the old family Bible, put on his spectacles & reverently read a chapter, & then prayed. We always had family worship, morning & evening.

But as I said before, trouble was to come. Business began to grow dull while the winter was still upon us. It steadily slackened. Presently it had so dwindled that there was

no trade but in chronic consumptions, & it is hardly worth while to mention that there is never much doing in cases of that sort in little country villages. The joy in the faces of the family gradually gave way to anxious looks, & we had but little pleasant talk, evenings. Things only grew worse as time went on. The spring opened gloomily. We had day after day of brilliant sunshine, clamor of warbling birds, balmy, healing, vivifying atmosphere — There was everything to make us dismal, heartsick, hopeless. — The spring dragged its

disastrous
~~disease~~ length along
& left a memorable
record behind it —
three months & a half
with scarcely a demise.
We got ready for
the summer trade. —
There came news that the
cholera ~~in~~ had appeared
in the seaports, & for the
first time in months
we had an old-time ~~cheery~~
evening of innocent gaiety
~~that was full~~
~~of smiles & harmless~~
~~jesting~~ in place of
bowed heads & heavy
sighs. The disease
spread from village
& village, till it reached
within five miles of us
— then it split apart &
wandered far away an

either side, leaving our town untouched!

"~~God~~" ~~He~~ ~~will be done!~~ "It is very hard," said Mr. Cadaver, & we saw the tears trickle through his fingers as he sat with his hands clasped over his face, rocking to & fro ~~in~~ and ~~agony~~ ~~anguish~~. softly moaning.

Once it had been our happiness on peaceful Sabbath afternoons, to stroll to Joseph's graveyard & count the new mounds & talk of the prospects. ~~for more~~. But this had long ceased. There were no new mounds any more; the turf had grown old upon all; there was no longer

anything about the graveyard that could cheer our hearts, but much to sadden them.

There came a time, at last, when we all ~~knew~~ realized that imminent disaster was hovering over us. — Nothing had been paid on the graveyard & the six hundred dollars would soon fall due. Old Marlow got to haunting the place with his evil eye. He would intrude in the most unexpected way & remind Mr. Cadaver to get ready to move out of the house if the money was not forthcoming on

the appointed day.

How the days flew! Once Mr. Cadaver appealed to him for a little time.

"Fine!" cried old Marlow. "What on!"

"My business, Mr. Marlow."

"Business! Fish! You have none. What are your assets? Come — show them up, man."

Mr. Cadaver showed him his list of coffins & other stock, & also a list of neighbors who were very low. These latter Mr. Marlow decided — laughed over the list heartily. Said he —

"You call those people assets? There ain't ~~a~~ one in the lot ~~that'll die~~ but will outlast this generation!"

"But sir, the doctor said this morning that old Mrs. Hale & Mr. Samson —"

"Bother what the doctor said! Mrs. Hale has been dying for ten years, & old Samson for fifteen. Call such stock as that, assets! The idea!"

"I have heard that George Simpson had a very bad night last night, & there is every hope — I mean every prospect that he —".

"Drop your hopes

of George Simpson, my friend. He sat up in bed this morning & ate a fricasseed chicken."

Mr. Cadaver murmured, with a sigh, "This is indeed an unexpected blow." He tried once more to throw a favorable aspect upon some of his assets, but Marlow scouted every name & said there was neither man, woman nor child in the list but would get well. He finally said:

"Skankye! You have neglected your business till ruin stares you in the face & it serves you right."

"I, sir? I cannot bury people if they will not die. Please have pity — think of my poor family — do not be hard with me Mr. Marlow. I am sure my assets are lower than you think them to be, & if you would only give me a little time to realize on them —"

"Not another word!" cried Marlow. "You will pay the last cent day after to morrow or out of this house you go!"

He banged the door & went.

III

That next day was a day never to be forgotten. All day long the family sat grouped together, saying little, now & then looking into each other's stony eyes, now & then clasping each other in a long embrace, & many were the smothered sobs that were heard, many the tears that fell.

I could not bear this sight long at a time. I flitted restlessly from house to house where we had hopes,

but gained no comfort. One client was "better, to-day;" another "about the same;" another had a "stronger pulse;" another had had "an easier night than usual." Always these dismal refrains. Whenever I entered our stricken home, I had to meet the mute inquiry of those ~~poor~~ pathetic eyes, but I never had to speak — my own looks conveyed my ~~dreary~~ heavy tidings & the hopeless heads were bowed once more.

I was up all

night, wandering about the village. The fatal day came the sun rose & still I wandered from house to house — but not to inquire — I had no heart to do that any longer. I only took friends of mine to these houses, & told them to wait, & if they got any news, to bring it to me with all speed.

Two hours later there was a scene in our house. Old Marlow was there, gloating over

his victims. He paced the floor banging upon it with his stick & talking like this:

"Come, the sooner you clear out of this, the better you'll suit me. A pack of paupers, that is what you are! Fine assets, truly! Coffins rotting away without sale, a graveyard that's become a grazing ground, a gang of convalescents that the lightning could hit, make market rule!"

So he raved on, enjoying himself. One after

another
~~one~~ ^ my friends came softly to the door, whispered their tiding to me & glided away. I let the old man storm on. At last my poor ^ old Cadaver rose feebly up, gathered his weeping wife to his side, ~~& took his children in his~~ & said —

"Go, my little children, & you, my poor daughter & my poor Joseph, go forth from the old home; it has no shelter, more, for our breaking hearts. Out into the bleak world we will

go together, & together will we starve & die."

And so, with bended heads & streaming eyes, they moved slow & sadly toward the door. Marlow waved his hand & said —

"Farewell, a long farewell! My house is well rid —"

"Hold!" I shouted. "Stay where you are!"

Everybody stared with inquiring astonishment. Old Marlow grew red with rage.

"What means this?" he cried.

~~The~~

"It means this!" said I. "Samson is ~~dead~~ no more! old Mrs. Hale is ~~dead~~ at peace! Philip Martin has ~~broken his neck~~ fallen with apoplexy! William Thompson is drowned! George Simpson has had a ~~backset & is dying~~ relapse & the rattle is in his throat! And harkye, ~~pe~~ wretch, the cholera is at our very doors & in its most malignant form!" –

With a wild joy Mr. Cadaver threw his arms around my neck & murmured – OVER

~~"God be thanked, God be thanked for~~

"O, precious, precious tidings! — blest be the tongue that has uttered them!"

~~for these ~~blessed~~ precious tidings~~
~~& blest be you, that bring them~~

Joseph & Gracie embraced with tears of ~~joy~~ gratitude, & then astounded me by embracing me too. In an instant misery was gone & tumultuous happiness had taken its place. I turned upon old Marlow & said —

"There, sir, is the door, be gone! You will be paid, never fear. And if you should want to borrow any money," I said, with bitter sarcasm, "do not hesitate

to say so, for we can ~~borrow~~ procure all we want, with our present business prospects."

He went away raging, & we ~~sat d~~ went gaily to work dusting stock ~~coffins & shrouds~~ & getting ready for the most ~~princely~~ lucrative day's work ~~the~~ our little shop had ever known.

Little remains to be told. Our prosperity moved straight along without a halt. Everything seemed to conspire to help us. No

village in all the region was so ravaged by the Cholera pestilence as was ours, the doctors were the first to go, & those who supplied their places passed through our hands & Joseph's with a curious & gratifying promptness. The graveyard grew in grace & beauty day by day till there was not a grass-patch visible in it, not a level spot to offend trouble the eye.

All in good time Joseph & Gracie were married, & there was a great & costly wed-

ding. As if to make
everything complete
& leave nothing to be
desired, the funerals
of the wedding day
paid the entire expense
of the occasion, & Mr.
Warlow himself was
the first candidate &
headed the procession
in a sixty-dollar metal
lic casket with white
satin linings & a
beautiful German silver
plate stating the date he
was born & the day date we
got him to this into camp.

Mark Twain